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Análisis Morfo-sintáctico del Inglés Vernáculo Afroamericano en Criadas y Señoras: algunas consideraciones étnicas

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Análisis Morfo-sintáctico del Inglés Vernáculo Afroamericano en Criadas y Señoras: algunas consideraciones étnicas, de MARINA GALDEANO CHASCO (publicada por la Universidad de La Rioja) se difunde bajo una Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial-SinObraDerivada 3.0 Unported. Permisos que vayan más allá de lo cubierto por esta licencia pueden solicitarse a los titulares del copyright.



TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

Título

**Morpho-syntactic Analysis of African American Vernacular English
in *The Help*: some ethnic considerations**

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Summary. This End of Degree Dissertation is a discourse analysis of the African American Vernacular English used by the black characters in the film *The Help*, directed by Tate Taylor and released in 2011. The main objective of this research is to investigate AAVE characteristics and examine them in the language used by the black characters in *The Help*. The second objective of this paper is to explain in which situations do black characters speak AAVE and in which ones they do not, and what is the effect of this context-dependent use of AAVE in the film.

This study focuses on the morpho-syntactic traits of AAVE since these are the most prominent and distinctive ones in this dialect. Further, it examines spoken language since it is centred in the dialogues of the black characters in the film. The method used is a mixture of the ethnography of communication approach and the conversational analysis approach. Data for the analysis has been collected from a selection of scenes from the film. This study of how AAVE is represented in *The Help* responds to my interest in cinema and the representation of white and black cultures. The analysis developed shows that AAVE serves as a tool for depicting the social and political relationship between the white and black communities. The analysis also reveals that the black characters change their language in front of white people and that they speak AAVE on a daily basis due to their inferior social status compared to the white community.

Keywords. African American Vernacular English, Standard American English, dialect, discourse, morpho-syntax, social classes, race, and *The Help*.

Resumen. Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado es un análisis del discurso del Inglés Vernáculo Afroamericano (AAVE en inglés) utilizado por los personajes de raza negra en la película *The Help* (*Criadas y señoras* en español), dirigida por Tate Taylor y estrenada en 2011. El objetivo principal de este estudio es investigar las características del lenguaje AAVE y examinarlas en el lenguaje utilizado por los personajes de raza negra en *The Help*. El segundo objetivo de este estudio es explicar en qué situaciones los personajes de raza negra hablan AAVE y en cuáles no, y cuál es el efecto de este uso contextual del lenguaje AAVE en la película.

Este estudio se centra en los rasgos morfosintácticos del lenguaje AAVE ya que son los más prominentes y distintivos de este dialecto. Además, examina el lenguaje hablado ya que se centra en los diálogos de los personajes negros de la película. El método

utilizado una mezcla de los enfoques de la etnografía de la comunicación y el análisis conversacional. Los datos para el análisis se han recogido a partir de una selección de escenas de la película. Este estudio de cómo se representa el lenguaje AVEE en *The Help* responde a mi interés por el cine y la representación de las culturas blanca y negra. El análisis desarrollado muestra que el lenguaje AAVE sirve como herramienta para describir la relación social y política entre las comunidades blanca y negra. El análisis también revela que los personajes negros cambian su lenguaje frente a los blancos y que hablan AAVE a diario debido a su condición social inferior en comparación con la comunidad blanca.

Palabras clave. Inglés Vernáculo Afroamericano, Inglés Americano Estándar, dialecto, discurso, morfo-sintaxis, clases sociales, raza, y *Criadas y señoras*.

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1. Introduction

African American Vernacular English (AAVE from now onwards) is a dialect that has always been underestimated and thought to be less prestigious than other dialects of English (Pullum, 1999). AAVE is also known as Ebonics, which means *black speech* (Rickford, 1999). According to Rickford (1999), before the introduction of this term, the dialect of the black people was known as *Nonstandard Negro English*. Rickford (1999) adds that black linguists found this term derogatory. Therefore, they invented this new term for their dialect: Ebonics. This dialect of English has very peculiar traits which come from the African origin of black people. This is one of the reasons why AAVE or Ebonics has always been and still is considered to be a language without rules. Some people even believe that speakers of AAVE do not know how to speak “correctly” (Pullum, 1999). However, these statements have been dismantled by many linguists such as Rickford (1999), who described AAVE’s features and evolution. Another example is Pullum’s (1999) *African American Vernacular English is not Standard English with mistakes*. Substantial research has been conducted in order to demonstrate that AAVE does follow a series of rules and that speakers of this dialect know how to use those rules. Zienkiewicz (2008) has shown that 80-90% of the African American population speaks AAVE in the United States. That is why there exists this need to conduct more research on other dialects of English, beyond the standard ones, because it seems impossible that all these African Americans speak the same dialect without following a set of rules.

The analysis of discourse is a field of linguistics which has been extensively studied by many linguists, becoming more and more important from the 1970s onwards. Discourse analysts did not share the ideas supported by Saussure and his followers; the idea that language is an abstract system of signs, which develops on its own, since it is an innate ability of the human being. Linguists such as Fowler (1979), one of the pioneers of discourse analysis, realised that up until that moment linguistics had been committed to an objective description of language, not taking into account why and how language in discourse is constructed. From that moment onwards, more linguists started to make their contributions to the study of language in its social context. The data collected for this project comes from some linguists who contributed to the study of discourse such as Van Dijk (2009) Deborah Schiffrin (1994). Many other important linguists have

made their contributions to the analysis of discourse such as Brown and Yule (1983), and Halliday and Hassan (1976).

Regarding the study of African American Vernacular English, the research on this dialect has increased in the last decades together with the realization of the discrimination that this and other dialects of English had received during history, as it is already illustrated in this section with the studies of Rickford (1999) and Pullum (1999). This End of Degree Dissertation investigates the characteristics of AAVE used in real life. A wide variety of studies have been conducted in this field such as Dillard's (1972) research on the history of the usage of AAVE in the United States. Another example of research on AAVE is DeBose's (1992) paper about how African Americans switch from African American English to Standard American English.

The last field investigated for the development of this research was the social and political context of the 1960s in the United States. This domain has also been broadly studied by historians, linguists, economists, etc., for instance, Matusow's (1984) compilation of the history of Liberalism in the United States in his book *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*.

Data extracted from all the sources cited above was used to do a discourse analysis of AAVE spoken by the black characters in *The Help* and a study of how the social and political situation of the 1960s in the United States influences the way they use language. The language used by the black characters in *The Help* has already been studied by many researchers as it is a very well-known film adapted from a very well-known novel. This study analyses a specific selection of scenes from the film in order to draw some conclusions on the representation of AAVE in *The Help*. The scenes selected are divided into two groups and the criteria used for this division is whether the black characters in the film feel comfortable and confident speaking AAVE, or on the contrary, if they feel judged or inferior because of their dialect. Thereafter, the system of analysis employed in this paper is to highlight a number of the black characters' sentences from each scene and analyse whether or not they speak AAVE in each situation, and which AAVE rules they are following. The second step in the analysis is to investigate why they feel comfortable or uncomfortable in each situation and how this is related to black characters' social status and race. This issue, although the film is set in the 1960s, is still very topical presently. It could be argued that the social and race

issues have not really changed for the black community since the 1960s. It is important to develop this type of studies, about the past of the black community in order to know where discrimination comes from, and about their current situation since they still struggle with racism. Thanks to studies like this one, more people can realise the consequences of white supremacy and that the fight for black people's rights dates back to decades ago but it is still necessary.

To answer these questions, the rest of the End of Degree Dissertation is organised as follows: Section 2 covers the objectives of the study and section 3 it is the methodology. Section 4 provides a description of Discourse Analysis, its developments and approaches. Section 5 engages in the description of the features of AAVE, with special focus on the morphological and syntactic ones. Section 6 presents the analysis of the selected scenes and compares the AAVE morpho-syntactic rules with the language used in the film. This section also analyses how the social and political context of the film affects the way the characters use language paying special attention to their view of social class and race. Section 7 gathers the results of the analysis and section 8 is a discussion of the implications of the results. Finally, section 9 is devoted to the conclusions and section 10 includes all the sources cited in this research.

2. Objectives

- The first objective of this End of Degree Dissertation is to do a discourse analysis of the morphology and syntax of African American Vernacular English as used by the black characters in the film *The Help*.
- A second aim is to compare the morpho-syntactic features of AAVE with the features found in the dialogues of the film.
- The third objective entails an analysis of whether the black characters in the film change their language in different situations and to what effect.
- The fourth and last goal is to investigate the depiction that the director does of class and race issues in the 1960s and how these affect the representation of AAVE in the film in a biased manner.

3. Discourse Analysis

3. 1. Introduction

This section revolves around the notion of discourse analysis, its evolution and its different methodologies and approaches. Discourse analysis is a branch within the study of discourse which has changed and developed during the decades. Discourse analysis was born from the need of studying language above the sentence level, which is the field of study of grammar analysis. Zellig Harris was the first scholar to use the term *discourse analysis* in the 1950s (Osoba & Sobola, 2014). Nowadays, discourse analysis is a combination of ancient currents and new ones. As Suci (2019, p. 6) explains in her book *Advances in discourse analysis*, discourse analysis is a qualitative method built on the notions of “enunciation, interaction, transaction and performance”, and which arose after the period when structuralism was the most important trend in linguistics. Another reason why discourse analysis is considered to be at a higher level of study than grammar analysis is that discourse is thought to be a more complex unit of language than the sentence, as Brown and Yule (1983, p. 1) explain: “The analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which their forms are designed to serve in human affairs.”

3. 2. History and evolution

During the history of discourse analysis, one of its main aims has been to cope with the limitations of studying language only at its sentence level. Many experts have contributed to this aspect by trying to connect linguistic conducts with cultural and social matters. In this regard, Zellig Harris (1952) states that the circumstances in which sentences are created are directly related to the connection between these sentences. Thus, resembling circumstances would lead to resembling discourses. Some circumstances that could influence the creation of discourse could be purpose, subject matter or the audience. That is why discourse analysis aims to study the mechanisms concerned with the organisation of discourse but also with the “encoding and decoding of its meaning” (Osoba & Sobola, 2014, p. 202). According to the authors, discourse analysis constitutes a very important tool in many fields of the academic world since discourse is used in any context where language is used with a communicative function, “such as law, science, medicine, education ...” (p. 202)

Noam Chomsky also did his contribution to this matter with his linguistic theory of universal grammar. Chomsky (1994) introduced two opposed but complementary concepts. The first one is what he called the *linguistic competence*, referring to the information about language that a speaker has available. And the second one is *linguistic performance* (Chomsky, 1994), meaning that the knowledge that each individual has of language can be used in different ways.

The vast majority of linguists share the idea explained by Suciu (2019) that, in order to understand the relationship between signs and those who used them, it is necessary to establish a new method. Similarly, Maingueneau (1991) stated that discourse analysis, as an enunciative device, should connect discourse and social contexts, because the main objective of discourse analysis is to understand how individuals communicate with each other in society and what rules they use for this purpose.

As Suciu (2019, p. 5) states, in the first steps of the study of discourse, the best part of linguists supported the distinction between *signified* and *signifier*, by which “the perception of the signified is conditioned by the one of the signifier.” According to what this author adds, present-day theories, however, give more importance to microstructural connections because they help us understand discourse as a big unit composed of simpler discursive units. As Osoba and Sobola (2014) explain, discourse is organised through two types of structures: micro-structures and macro-structures. This division replaces the distinction made in previous theories between signified and signifier. A micro-structure is the union of the smallest units of language which create words, phrases, clauses and sentences. On the other hand, a macro-structure is what organises the discourse beyond the sentence level (Osoba & Sobola, 2014).

One of the aims of discourse analysis is to connect “language with social, psychological and cultural factors” (Suciu, 2019, p. 4) so that the interpretation of meaning is more truthful. The reason for this is that the main characteristic of the discourse is its collectiveness in composition, as well as the “intervention of social and cultural norms” (Suciu, 2019, p. 4). Suciu (2019) exemplifies this by looking at one of the mechanisms used in discourse formation, which is the connection of sentences. It must be highlighted that this relation of sentences does not occur on its own, but has a

lot to do with the specific context in which some specific sentences are connected, thus creating a specific meaning.

As is explained by Schiffrin (1994) in her book *Approaches to discourse analysis*, discourse is made up of smaller units of language: utterances. However, these utterances are not created out of context. Schiffrin adds that what differentiates an utterance from a sentence is that the utterance is built in a specific context and the sentence is not. That is why context is another important concept for the study of discourse. For discourse linguists, the context is the “social environment in which a text [or discourse] occurs” (Osoba & Sobola, 2014, p. 210). The context is made up of external factors which facilitate the understanding of meaning to the participant. Another feature of utterances is that they are conceived to perform an action.

In his book *Introduction to Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics*, Wale Osisanwo (2003-2005) presents what he thinks the main characteristics of discourse are:

- Discourse is a conversation or interaction between people.
- It is characterised by its participants; the people taking part in the conversation.
- It is governed by the *turn-taking* mechanism: participants in discourse take turns to speak.
- Sometimes, overlapping occurs when two or more participants speak at the same time.
- Most of the times, however, when a participant is finishing talking, they will select the next speaker.
- Discourse markers organise and connect ideas within discourse.
- Another important feature of discourse is its texture, as Osoba and Sobola (2014) explain in their chapter *Introduction to discourse analysis*. This term refers to the quality of the discourse, which makes it different from others. According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), it is also a mechanism used to relate sentences one to another and to unify the discourse as a whole unit of language.

This End of Degree Dissertation focuses on spoken discourse as it analyses verbal interaction between the characters in *The Help*. Although written discourse is also an important field in discourse analysis, it is, nonetheless, not relevant for the purpose of

this research. The figure 1 below illustrates the differences between spoken and written discourse.

Spoken discourse	Written discourse
Made out of verbal utterances.	Made out of written sentences.
Faster and more spontaneous.	Thoroughly constructed.
Short sentences and repeated words.	Organised into paragraphs and structured with discourse connectors.
The hearer is usually present when the discourse is verbalised.	The reader is not usually present when the discourse is written.
The speaker usually gets an immediate response.	The writer does not get an immediate response.
They include non-verbal conducts, “such as facial gestures and body movements” (Osoba & Sobola, 2014, p. 208).	

Figure 1: comparison between spoken discourse and written discourse.

As Suciu (2019) states, the study of discourse is generally divided into two branches: the Anglo-American current and the French one. The Anglo-American method has its focal point almost entirely on the discursive internal features, such as “consistency, cohesion and pertinence” (Suciu, 2019, p. 6). On the other hand, the French current focuses on the communicative employment of language (Suciu, 2019, p. 6). Suciu (2019) adds that while the Anglo-American branch was influenced by fields of study such as anthropology and sociology, the French direction was marked by the psychoanalysis, Marxism and linguistics.

3. 3. Approaches to Discourse Analysis

Having reviewed the origins of discourse analysis and its evolution, the different approaches to the study of analysis are tackled here. Although many authors have defined and provided classifications of the different approaches to discourse analysis, this study follows Deborah Schiffrin's (1994) taxonomy, which displays as follows:

- *Pragmatics* is the study of meaning in context, beyond literal meanings. That is the study of the meaning of a sentence regarding its function and the context in which it was conveyed.

- *The theory of speech acts* was developed by J. L. Austin in the 1930s. This theory is based on the belief that when a person verbalizes an utterance, he or she is performing an action at the same time. For instance, when people make an order, they are ordering someone to do something at the same time that they verbalise the order.
- *Semiotics* is the “study and analysis of signs and symbols found in all forms of communication” (Osoba & Sobola, 2014, p. 214). This linguistic approach analyses the relationship between the sign and the concept denoted by the sign. Most of the times, this relationship is arbitrary. Sometimes, however, there are circumstances related to class, race, age, etc. that can provide meaning to this relationship.
- *Interactional sociolinguistics* studies conversation at the time and place it is taking place; real-time and face-to-face conversations (Gumperz, 1982). It aims to observe “how people from different cultural backgrounds may share grammatical knowledge of a language” (Osoba & Sobola, 2014, p. 217) or how, by contrast, different meanings may arise in the same situation because of these cultural differences. Most of the times our cultural identity (social status, ethnicity, etc.) is reproduced in the way we use language. That is why this approach to discourse analysis is so helpful.
- *Ethnography of communication* is an anthropological method of analysis which studies living cultures. Its main objective is to investigate how people act in a specific context. Applied to linguistics, this method of analysis was developed by Hyme between the 1960s and the 1970s and it studies “naturally occurring language” (Osoba & Sobola, 2014, p. 215). In other words, *ethnography of communication* studies the way people communicate in a specific time and place. Using this method one can observe which rules and mechanisms certain individuals use in specific contexts in order to communicate their messages and understand other people’s.
- Lastly, *conversational analysis* is similar to *the ethnography of communication* since it also analyses language occurring in a natural context. However, it does it from a sociological perspective. *Conversational analysis* studies the social mechanisms used by individuals to produce utterances (Schiffrin, 1994). It

concentrates its attention on the social context in which a conversation is taking rather than on a specific time and place as *ethnography of communication* does.

The methodological approach used in this piece of research is a mixture between ethnography of communication and conversational analysis because it analyses the language used by the black characters in *The Help* both from a social and cultural perspective, paying attention to time, place, social class and race. Pragmatics, the theory of speech acts and semiotics are not the approaches that better suit this project since it analyses the form of language more than its meaning. Interactional sociolinguistics neither is the appropriate approach of study for this project since the study is focused on AAVE and there are no comparisons between dialects unless strictly necessary.

4. African American Vernacular English

4. 1. History and evolution

This section provides a brief explanation of the history of AAVE, of how it developed into the English variety that African Americans speak nowadays, and of the position AAVE has in American society. Generally, linguists tend to adhere to one of the two leading theories about the origins of African American Vernacular English: the *Anglicist* approach and the creole-origins approach. Figure 2 compares the main points of both theories:

<i>Anglicist theory</i>	Creole-origins theory
Most of AAVE features have English origins (Dillard, 1992).	Some of the characteristics of AAVE do not have English origins (Mufwene, 2014).
Few traits of AAVE can be traced back to African ancient languages (Mufwene, 2014).	Not all of the creole features were lost (Mufwene, 2014).
It recognizes some influence of African creoles in the development and construction of AAVE (Mufwene, 2014).	The creole spoken by African Americans working on plantations in the South of the United States gradually lost its peculiar traits and embraced new ones (Mufwene, 2014) by a process of <i>decreolization</i> (Dillard, 1972, 1992 and Stewart, 1967).

Figure 2: comparison between the *Anglicist* theory and the creole-origins theory of AAVE.

Mufwene (2014) notes that from the 1980s onwards new authors and linguists join the investigation on AAVE and its origins. Edgar W. Schneider was one of them and he focused his research on ways AAVE “diverged from the English varieties spoken by White Americans in the north” (Mufwene, 2014, p. 354). According to Bailey and Thomas (1998), African American Vernacular English and American White Southern English coexisted together at tobacco and cotton plantations until the end of the 19th century and the beginning of 20th. This is the reason why these two varieties are so similar in grammatical structures and phonology. Another argumentation for this, according to Mufwene (2014), is that the English language was not a homogenous language in England and when it was brought to the different colonies it continued evolving in different ways.

There is a group of linguists, Mufwene among them, who believe that AAVE was a *white* invention since most African Americans state that they speak English. Jim Crow is seen by many as one of the originators of AAVE. Crow was a theatre character related to the segregation laws implemented at the end of the 19th century in the American Southeast. Although slavery time was over, these laws signified the discrimination of black people from white people. As a result, around 6.5 million African Americans migrated from Southern states to Northern ones looking for an improved quality of life. However, African Americans found themselves living in

ghettoes, isolated from the white society. Consequently, they maintained the English variety they spoke in the South (Mufwene, 2014).

In December 1996, the school board of Oakland, California proclaimed Ebonics, or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), as the official language of African American students (Baugh, 2004). According to Baugh (2004), the Oakland school board aimed to fight for the rights of African American students. However, as the author adds, the concept of Ebonics was proposed for the first time to the whole linguistic community in 1973 at a conference which was later published as a book entitled *Ebonics: the true language of black folks*, written by Robert Williams (1975). The members of the Oakland school board thought that *Black English* was not a suitable term because it was vague and ambiguous. They thought that a term which referred to the dialect itself was more appropriate than one designating the race of its speakers (Baugh, 2004). Some of the conclusions that the Oakland school board drew was that AAVE, like any other language, is “systematic and rule-governed” and that referring to AAVE as “broken English” or “slang”, “defective”, or “ungrammatical” language is derogative (Baugh, 2004, p. 306). According to Baugh (2004), what was really important for the Oakland school board was to recognize AAVE as a rule-governed system rather than discussing whether AAVE is a language or a dialect. Baugh (2004) notes that after the Oakland school board published its resolutions, more linguists and experts proposed definitions for the new term *Ebonics*. For instance, Toliver-Weddington (1979, p. 364) defined Ebonics as “a language (dialect) that is spoken by Black Americans living in low-income communities that has some specific characteristics observed in the phonological and grammatical system.”

There was another interpretation provided by Smith (1992, 1998) which, according to Baugh (2004), highly influenced the opinion of the members of the Oakland school board. Smith (1992, 1998) claimed that the term *Ebonics* is not a synonym for the previously used *Black English*. In fact, he thinks of it as an antonym of Black English because Ebonics is not directly related to English. Therefore, in Smith's opinion, Ebonics should not be contemplated as a dialect of English (Baugh, 2004).

As it was mentioned above, one of the objectives of the Oakland school board was to enhance the education of African American students in Oakland's public schools. Baugh (2004) argues that it was hard for educators in these schools to stimulate

students' interest in learning the standard dialect of English because for many African Americans the embracement of the standard form of English pairs with losing their own identity. The Oakland school board started a discussion around the Ebonics issue which was never solved. As Baugh (2004, p. 316) observes, "African American students continue to attend underfunded and overcrowded schools". The Oakland school board was heavily criticised and eventually gave up in their fight. The opposition did not want to drop attention into the past of African Americans as slaves and their consequently inherited educational situation (Baugh, 2004).

4. 2. Characteristics of AAVE

African American Vernacular English shares most of its characteristics with Standard American English. For instance, in respect of the lexicon, AAVE and Standard American English vocabulary are generally the same (Zienkiewicz, 2008). In particular, Zienkiewicz (2008) notes that AAVE shares most of its vocabulary with the varieties of English spoken in the south of the United States and the less formal varieties. Curiously, this author adds that more than a few typically AAVE words have entered Standard American English vocabulary, such as *jazz*, *chill out* or *soul*. However, as Green (2002) and Zienkiewicz (2008) argue, there are also some examples of words that are only used by AAVE speakers, such as *ashy* (dry skin), *siditty* (snobbish) or *bougie* (an elitist African American).

According to Green (2002), one of the most distinctive traits of AAVE regarding pronunciation is the substitution of the /ð/ sound by the sounds /d/, /t/ or /f/ in words like *these*, *with* and *birthday*. A speaker of AAVE would pronounce these words as /dɪz/ for *these*, /wɪt/ for *with*, and /'bɜːfdeɪ/ for *birthday*. Another phonetic feature of AAVE is the omission of the /ŋ/ sound in words ending in -ing (Green, 2002). Speakers of AAVE would pronounce /'tɔːkɪn/ for *talking* while a Standard American English speaker would say /'tɔːkɪŋ/. Green (2002) also observes that AAVE speakers sometimes omit the second or third consonants in a construct of various consonants at the end of words. For instance, a speaker of AAVE would probably say /mɪs/ for both *mist* and *missed*.

Morphosyntactic features of AAVE probably are the ones that distinguish it the most from Standard American English. That is why this paper analyses them in the film *The Help*.

- *Copula absence*: speakers of AAVE, unlike Standard American English speakers, usually drop the forms of the verb *to be* in sentences like *They are hungry* or *He is coming* (Zienkiewicz, 2008). AAVE speakers would say *They hungry* and *He coming*. However, Zienkiewicz (2008) adds that the forms *am*, *was* and *were* are never omitted. AAVE does not apply this rule in sentences like *I am going to the dentist* or *Last night was fun*. This rule is also known as *be-deletion*.
- Omission of a form of the verb *to be* when it works as an auxiliary verb (Sharma & Rickford, 2009) as in *They gonna be late*. Instead, a Standard American English speaker would say *They're gonna be late*.
- *Habitual be*: using a form of the verb *to be* in a situation that is habitual or repetitive, for instance, *Jenny be talking on the phone* (Zienkiewicz, 2008). This author explains that this sentence does not mean that Jenny is talking on the phone right now, but that Jenny habitually talks on the phone.
- The omission of the 3rd person singular -s: a speaker of AAVE would not say *She loves chocolate*, but *She love chocolate* (Green, 2002).
- *Double negation* and the acceptable use of *ain't*: rather than the Standard American English sentence *Nobody can beat me*, AAVE speakers would probably say *Ain't nobody can beat me* (Jones, 2014).
- *It* instead of *There* as the subject of sentences like *There is someone waiting for you there*. An AAVE speaker would say *It is someone waiting for you* (Jones, 2014).
- Remote present perfect: the sentence *She been lived in London* expresses an action that was completed a long time ago. A speaker of Standard American English would express this idea with the sentence *She lived in London a long time ago* (Green, 2002 and Jones, 2014).
- *Completive done*: the form *done* of the verb *to do* functions as a perfect (Martin, 2018). Whilst a speaker Standard American English would say *I have missed you*, an AAVE speaker would say *I done missed you*.

5. Methodology

This section explains the methodology underlying this study. The first step is to investigate what discourse analysis is and how it is done. The field of discourse analysis has been extensively studied by many linguists as it was shown in the theoretical framework section. For the purpose of this research, discourse analysis is considered as a complex linguistic tool (as Brown and Yule state, more complex than sentence-level

analysis) that connects discourse and the cultural and social contexts where it occurs and that studies what rules do speakers follow to construct discourse, agreeing with Maingueneau's (1991) vision of discourse analysis. Besides, Osisanwo's (2003-2005) characteristics of discourse are assimilated in this paper when analysing AAVE. The second step is to collect data about what African American Vernacular English is and which ones are the main features of this dialect (specific AAVE lexicon, omission of the /ɪ/ sound, etc.). Next, the analysis focuses on the morpho-syntactic traits of AAVE (*be-deletion*, *habitual be* and the omission of the 3rd person singular -s, amongst others) since these are the most prominent ones when AAVE is compared to Standard American English. The next step is to select the most relevant scenes for the analysis of discourse of AAVE morpho-syntax and carry out the analysis employing a mixture of two approaches in discourse analysis: ethnography of communication and conversational analysis. The final step in the development of this project is to apply the ethnic approach to the study of the language used by the black characters.

6. Analysis of AAVE and social and racial implications in *The Help*

This section is devoted to the analysis of AAVE in the scenes selected from the film *The Help*. These are divided into two groups: the first one covers some scenes in which the black characters are in a family context and feel comfortable and secure speaking AAVE. By contrast, the second group of scenes examines some situations in which the black characters seem to feel either judged or embarrassed because of their dialect.

The Help tells the story of Miss Skeeter, a young white woman who returns to her village in the South of the United States from college determined to become a writer. She wants to interview black women who have spent their lives serving white families and suffering all forms of racial discrimination. She wants to publish a book with the maid's testimonies so their stories are known by everybody.



Figure 3: Aibileen is explaining her experience as a maid in a white house in an interview with Miss Skeeter (minute 02:06 *The Help*).

The film is narrated by Aibileen, one of the main characters in the film and a black maid working in a white house. As an African American, she speaks AAVE. She narrates the opening of the film and there are several examples of the AAVE morpho-syntactic rules explained in section 4.2 in this fragment (from 01:23 to 03:39). When Miss Skeeter asks Aibileen “What does it feel to raise a white child when you own child’s at home being looked after by somebody else?”, she answers “It feel...” She does not finish the sentence but we can observe an AAVE morpho-syntactic rule: the unmarked third-person singular verb. A Standard American English speaker would have said: “It feels...” Instead, Aibileen omits the -s ending of the third person singular verb. It is also noticeable the use of the completive *done* rule in several sentences: “I done raised 17 kids in my life”, “I done seen it happen plenty of times”. Aibileen uses the form *done* as a perfect since a speaker of Standard American English would say “I have raised...” and “I have seen...”

Other characteristic morpho-syntactic rules of AAVE found in this fragment are the use of *ain’t* and the double negation. When talking about the white little girl she takes care of, Aibileen says: “Ain’t going to be no beauty queen either” (03:36). Besides, she omits the subject of the sentence that is *she*, the little girl. A Standard American English speaker would have expressed this sentence as “She is not going to be a beauty queen either”.

There is a sentence in this fragment that has received negative criticism, especially because it became a kind of motto of the film: “You is kind, you is smart, you is important” (02:46). This sentence is said by Aibileen to the white little girl she takes care of. Some critics (Pagelady, 2011) claim that this sentence does not follow any morpho-syntactic rule of AAVE. On the one hand, the expected thing would have been to use the be-deletion rule and say “You kind, you smart, you important”. On the other hand, if you want to introduce the verb *to be*, an AAVE speaker would have followed the habitual be rule and said: “You be kind, you be smart, you be important”. Nevertheless, some sources (Wolfram, 2009) claim that AAVE speakers tend to level the form *are* and *am* of the verb *to be* to a single form: *is*. “You are kind” would be the correct form in Standard American English. In any case, it could be said that the “you is kind” sentence hinders the consistency of Aibileen’s speech because this pattern is not repeated in the rest of the film.

This is one of the situations in which Aibileen feels comfortable speaking AAVE. Miss Skeeter is sitting in Aibileen’s kitchen table as if they were friends. She is narrating the story so she can be herself. Besides, the narration of the film is at the same time part of the interviews between Miss Skeeter and Aibileen. As the film progresses, the viewer learns that Miss Skeeter creates a strong bond with the maids, and they feel comfortable speaking AAVE around her.



Figure 4: Minny and Aibileen are talking on the phone about something very bad that Minny has done to her white lady (minute 38:05 *The Help*).

Another scene where we can find several examples of AAVE morpho-syntactic features is the one in which Aibileen and Minny, the main two black maids in the story, are talking on the phone (from 38:00 to 39:10). Minny is telling Aibileen about a horrible thing she did to the white lady she worked for before she was fired. “I done went and did it now.” She is using the completive *done* here, as well as in “She done told every white woman in town I’m a thief.” Just like Aibileen in the scene analysed above, Minny uses the form *done* as a perfect. In this case, a speaker of Standard American English would say “I have gone and did it now” and “She has told...” Minny also follows the rules of double negation and the use of *ain’t* in sentences like “I ain’t telling nobody” and “But now I ain’t gonna never get a job again”. In these situations, a Standard American English speaker would say “I’m not telling anybody” and “... I’m not gonna get a job again”, or “... I’m never gonna get a job again”. Minny finishes a sentence by saying “... and now she know what I done”. Here, she is following the unmarked third person singular verb rule on the one hand, and the auxiliary verb deletion rule on the other. In this case, a speaker of Standard American English would say “... and now she *knows* what I *have* done.” Minny also omits the auxiliary verb in the sentence “Leroy gonna kill me”.

In this scene, Aibileen and Minny, two African American friends talking on the phone, each of them in their house, feel comfortable to speak AAVE. No white person is listening to them who could judge them by their dialect. Besides, it could be observed from this scene that they are used to speak AAVE at their homes as the first sentence Minny’s husband says when he enters the house is “What you done did now, Minny?” He is using the completive *done* too. It is also observable in this scene that the lighting and the atmosphere in the houses of the black characters are much darker and duller than the white character’s houses. This point, together with the fact that white and black characters speak two different dialects of English, seems to intensify the social distance between the blacks and the whites. It emphasizes the fact that black and white people lived in different worlds back in the 1960s in the United States.



Figure 5: The pastor is giving a speech about being brave and about what God asks from the black community (minute 40:13 *The Help*).

This next one is a scene in which a black character does not speak AAVE. Instead, the minister or pastor of the black church in this scene (40:00) speaks Standard American English. For instance, in the sentence “Courage isn’t just about being brave”, he does not use the AAVE characteristic *ain’t*. Also, he marks the 3rd person singular verb in “God tells us, commands us, compels us...” An AAVE speaker would say “God tell us, command us, compel us...” It seems obvious that the scriptwriters of the film tried to highlight this character as the only black character who does not speak AAVE. In this short scene, we cannot find examples of copula absence, double negation, completive done, or any other of the morpho-syntactic characteristic of AAVE explained in section 4.2 of this paper. All the pastor’s sentences are constructed in perfect Standard American English.

The pastor has a serious and respectable profession and he must have had some education, at least more education than the rest of the black community. Thus, here again speaking AAVE or Standard American English is linked to educational status. African-Americans speak AAVE because of their lack of education. Besides, a pastor speaks in the name of God. The Bible is written in Standard American English. Therefore, he must use “perfect” English, even when surrounded only by African-Americans who speak AAVE in their daily life. In addition to all of this, going to the Church is an activity shared by the white and the black community, even though they obviously did not go to the same churches. Still, it is something that unites them and in black churches, the word of God must be the same than in white churches.



Figure 6: A black waiter serves Miss Skeeter when she meets her friends in a restaurant (minute 54:58 *The Help*).

This one is an example of a situation in which a black character changes his language in front of a white person. In this scene a waiter is serving food to Miss Skeeter. This is a very short scene and the waiter only produces two sentences. However, it serves as a good example for this study. For instance, the waiter says “You’re welcome”. A speaker of AAVE would probably have implemented the copula absence rule and would have said “You welcome”. Also, he says the sentence “I made you the egg and olive on rye, Miss Skeeter” with exaggerated pronunciation. These factors make it obvious that he is trying to satisfy the white ladies by intentionally changing or adapting his language. He is serving whites so his speech must be “correct”, if not they would probably be annoyed. Even though it seems that the waiter has dealt with Miss Skeeter before and she is very friendly with him in this short conversation, the black waiter behaves like a servant probably because the other white ladies sitting in the table too are not usually as friendly as Miss Skeeter with blacks. Not only he is a waiter; he has prepared Miss Skeeter’s order before she asks for anything and he has prepared it in a special way for her. Everything in this short scene, the waiter’s change of language and his servant attitude, depicts accurately the social distance (or hierarchy) between blacks and whites in the 1960s in the United States.

7. Results

This section presents the results obtained from the analysis in the previous section of this paper. Three main results are observed from the analysis of the language used by

the black characters in *The Help*. One of them is that the black's language is altered when they are in a scene with white characters. In other words, black characters tend to standardise their language in front of whites. The reason for this observation is that African-Americans were considered inferior to white people in the 1960s in the United States. So, if they wanted to be respected, or at least to work for the whites, they needed to adapt to them; they needed to adapt their language among other things. This result is illustrated in the last scene analysed in section 6: the black waiter serving the white ladies says two sentences in Standard American English in a very exaggerated way and he does not follow any AAVE morpho-syntactic rule. Even though Miss Skeeter is very friendly to him, there are other white ladies there and he must behave in the best way possible; he must speak "perfectly".

There is an exception to this result since there are some situations in which black characters feel comfortable to speak AAVE in front of whites and they do not standardize their language. This is the case of the first scene analysed in the previous section. Aibileen feels relaxed when talking to Miss Skeeter in AAVE because she knows that Miss Skeeter, although being white, is inclusive with her and she will not judge her or think that Aibileen is inferior to whites. As a general rule, all black characters in the film feel comfortable speaking AAVE in front of Miss Skeeter.

The second result of the analysis conducted is that the black characters speak AAVE on a daily basis and in every situation of their daily life when they are not in front of whites. All the conversations between the black characters in the film are in AAVE. It is their language and they use it when they do not feel judged. For instance, in the scene in which Aibileen and Minny are talking on the phone, they only use AAVE morpho-syntactic constructions. There is only one black character in the film who does not speak AAVE on a daily basis: the pastor of the black church. Curiously, he does not work for the whites, but his job is to spread the word of God. That is why he speaks in Standard American English. This leads to the last result of the analysis.

The third result of this study is that the two different dialects used in *The Help* support the depiction of the social distance between blacks and whites in the 1960s in the United States, especially in terms of education. White characters speak "perfect" English because they have access to education. On the contrary, black characters represent the lack of education through their dialect. The pastor, who is black but must

have received some education, speaks Standard American English. The blacks and the whites belonged to two different worlds in those days and that is represented in the film through the different dialects.

8. Discussion

This section serves as a deeper explanation of the results presented in the previous section and its implications. Also, it explains how these results can be applied in following research or practice. The findings reached in the analysis were expected for the most part. It is general knowledge, as it was also investigated in social and cultural previous studies (Matusow's 1984), that the white has been the superior and ruler race in the United States — and many other countries — for many decades and centuries. The white community is realising now the consequences of white supremacy over the black community and many white American citizens are supporting the fight for black people's rights. However, racism has been a constant in the United States since European colonization. For this reason, it is not surprising that the black characters in *The Help* live serving the white community, both physically, working as maids, car drivers, waiters, etc.; and culturally. It is in this aspect of their servitude that the change in language depending on the context is observable. As it was mentioned in the results section, the black characters in the film standardise their language when talking to white persons because their dialect, AAVE, is not good enough for them. The complementary result to this is that the black characters speak AAVE in their houses with their family on a daily basis. It is very clear and observable how the black characters change their language in these two types of situations.

On the other hand, some findings were not contemplated before realizing the analysis and these are the exceptions to the two first results presented in the previous section. The fact that some black characters feel comfortable speaking AAVE in front of white people, especially around Miss Skeeter, was not expected. However, it is presented in a way that helps the viewer understand more deeply the class and race issues of the time: not everybody was racist to the black community and some of them accepted the African American culture and language. This part of the American society is primarily represented by Miss Skeeter but also by other characters, such as Celia Foote, the lady Minny works for, and Elaine Stein, the literary agent who publishes Miss Skeeter's book. The fight for African American rights was already in the street, as

it is shown in the film, and more and more white people supported the fight. However, the facts that Miss Skeeter hides her friendship with Aibileen, Minny and the rest of maids and that she writes her book about the maids' experiences secretly show that her behaviour was something unacceptable in the white society of the 1960s. On the contrary, it is assumed that the pastor of the church, as he is black, would speak AAVE. He does not and, as it is explained in the analysis section, this is due to his profession. His job is linked with something superior, that is God, and that is why he must speak in the "perfect" form of English.

The last result in the previous section is a reflection of one of the strategies used by the film director and the scriptwriters of *The Help* to depict the society of that time. Not only in the sense that AAVE represents the African American community and Standard American English represents the white community. Combining and contrasting these two dialects a portrayal of the relationship between these two groups of the American society is done. The white community and their "perfect" dialect are at a superior level and the black community and AAVE adapt to this dominance.

These results and their implications could be employed in further research. As it was already mentioned, AAVE has been extensively studied and it needs to continue this way. AAVE should not be considered a less prestigious dialect compared to Standard American English, as any other dialect of any other language. Studies like this enhance the importance of discredited dialects and signify the fact that to produce a film where a dialect, AAVE in this case, is used you need to do wide research on how AAVE is used in real life. More studies need to be done in this field of linguistics, for instance analysing other features of AAVE, beyond morphological and syntactic ones. Also, how is AAVE used nowadays? Do speakers of AAVE use the same rules that were used in the 1960s? Are the black community and their dialect depicted in the same way in earlier films, or in films set in other parts of the United States? The findings reached in this paper could also be applied to real life, comparing them to present-time interviews or to recordings from the 1960s, in order to determine if there are fixed rules in real language use or not.

9. Conclusions

This paper adapts Brown and Yule's (1983) vision of what it is discourse analysis: a complex linguistic tool which connects discourse and the cultural and social context in

which it occurs. In this case, discourse analysis is developed to connect the discourse of black characters in *The Help* to the context of being black in the 1960s in the South of the United States. Also, as presented by Maingueneau (1991), the rules that the speaker uses when constructing discourse in a specific situation need to be analysed in order to do a discourse analysis. For this reason, the morpho-syntactic characteristics of AAVE presented in Section 4. 2. are used to conduct this study. The morpho-syntactic rules of AAVE more repeated in the black character's dialogues are the copula absence, the habitual be, the omission of 3rd person singular -s, the double negation with *ain't*, and the completive done.

The contributions of this End of Degree Dissertation focus on the third objective, which is to analyse whether the black characters in the film change their language in different situations. This paper provides a deeper insight into the issue of what situations or contexts make African Americans comfortable speaking their dialect and which ones take them to adapt their language into a more standardised form. In order to reach the results provided in Section 7 regarding this issue, the black character's dialect is analysed in different situations of the film: when talking to another black character, when talking in front of white characters, when feeling comfortable speaking AAVE with a white person, etc.

The last objective of this study is to analyse how class and race issues of the 1960s in the United States affect the representation of AAVE in *The Help*. This matter is examined in the analysis by giving reasons for the black character's change of dialect in the different scenes. As shown in the results section of this paper, it is the white society's social and cultural superiority which leads the black characters to feel inferior and, therefore, feel ashamed of their dialect. This field of the study could be examined in more detail in upcoming research as this paper is limited to the representation of AAVE in a film, which is not real, in a single town of the South of the United States. The results of this study could be compared with findings of the same analysis in other parts of the country in the same years or in other films; *The Butler*, for instance.

The analysis developed to complete the objectives leads to the findings presented in Section 7:

1. The black characters change their language in front of white people except when a white person is friendly with them and they feel comfortable speaking AAVE.
2. Black characters speak AAVE on a daily basis.
3. AAVE and Standard American English are used to depict the social and political relationship between the white and black communities.

Ultimately, the depiction of AAVE and the way black characters in *The Help* construct their language is employed as a strategy to depict the social, cultural and political context of the 1960s in the United States. This study shows how by analysing the language used by a social group considerable information can be observed about their social and political situation in a given context.

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